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**Developing facilitation skills amongst undergraduate nursing students to promote dementia awareness with children in a higher education institution (innovative practice)**

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**Title:** Developing facilitation skills amongst undergraduate nursing students to promote dementia awareness with children in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) (innovative practice)

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## **Abstract**

Final-year students on a BSc Hons Nursing programme in Scotland were supported to become Dementia Friends facilitators and develop interactive dementia awareness sessions for children from local schools. The children were invited to indicate phrases and images they associated with 'dementia' at the outset and end of the session. Analysis of the responses suggested there were positive changes in the **children's** values and beliefs when thinking about a person living with dementia during the sessions. We suggest that peer learning is a valuable strategy to increase public and professional awareness about dementia and supports the development of graduate attributes.

## **Keywords**

Dementia, Dementia Friends, education, **inclusivity**, peer facilitation

## Introduction and background

The number of persons living with a dementia in the United Kingdom (UK) is expected to increase by 40% over the next decade (Alzheimer's Society 2017). National strategies have highlighted the importance of increasing public and professional awareness about dementia and how to provide better help and support (**Department of Health 2009**, Scottish Government 2017). It is therefore imperative that nursing students are adequately prepared to respond to the wide range and vastly different personal needs of persons living with dementia.

Higher education has a valuable contribution to make in terms of teaching and learning about living with dementia. As part of a strategic commitment to become a dementia aware university, the Division of Nursing at Queen Margaret University (QMU) provides opportunities for students and staff to attend Dementia Friends awareness sessions facilitated by Alzheimer Scotland. Dementia Friends is a UK wide project offered by Alzheimer Scotland, which supports its implementation. Recognised by healthcare employers, the sessions also add to employability in professional practice, and can enable students to be dementia friendly resources within their families and communities. Some areas covered in Dementia Friends sessions include: learning more about the different types of dementia; how living with a dementia may affect a person's activities of daily living and their overall wellbeing; how someone can live well with a dementia; and how everyone can help create dementia friendly communities. Each interactive Dementia Friends session is approximately one hour long and encourages participants to turn their understanding of dementia into an action that helps and/or supports someone living with dementia.

Peer learning is an active process in which students support the learning of other students whilst learning themselves. Interactions involving peer learning are known to increase student engagement and understanding of student learners (Falchikov 2001). Moreover, the experience of being a peer facilitator can also lead to the development of desirable graduate attributes such as leadership skills and an increased sense of belonging at university (**Tharulli, O'Flaherty & Shepherd 2014**).

## Aims of this project

In this innovative project we aimed to support undergraduate students in the final year of a BSc Hons Nursing programme to become Dementia Friends facilitators with children to raise awareness about dementia as a condition, **find out about** how persons can live well with dementia and **consider** what society can do to make a positive difference to persons living with dementia in our communities. We enabled the student facilitators to design a workshop that made use of interactive and fun resources to support the required content and ensure it was appropriate for younger learners.

## Methods

The project was guided by principles of person-centred research practice (McCormack and McCance 2017). In particular, we aimed to provide a facilitated safe space in which children could engage in social based learning in a way that might positively influence values, beliefs, knowledge and offer an insight into actions that they could take.

The project began with the preparation of **year four university students on a BSc Honours Nursing degree programme** as Dementia Friends facilitators by an Alzheimer Scotland Dementia Friends trainer. This training was consolidated in a session with year one **undergraduate university** nursing students in January 2017 (n=45), in advance of a practice learning placement when the year one nursing students would be caring for older adults. **The year one** nursing students were also offered the opportunity to become Dementia Friends facilitators and invited to contact their lecturer if they were interested in doing so. Subsequently, the student facilitators and staff co-designed and co-produced interactive learning activities to support the delivery of dementia awareness sessions to younger learners as part of widening access initiatives (Box 1).

Table 1: Wider access initiatives

The Health and Social Care Academies (HSCA) helps local S5 and 6 pupils (**aged 15-17 years**) to move seamlessly from school to college, university or directly into employment. See:

<https://www.gmu.ac.uk/study-here/for-schools-and-advisors/academies/>

The Childrens' University (CU) promotes social mobility by providing exciting and innovative learning activities outside normal school hours to help local schoolchildren, aged 5 to 14, to become confident learners, responsible citizens and effective contributors. See:

<https://www.qmu.ac.uk/study-here/for-schools-and-advisors/childrens-university/>

Ethical approval was secured from the University. This ensured appropriate informed consent, privacy, dignity and support was maintained for all participants and student peer trainers throughout this project.

The workshop had four interactive sessions, each with learning activities lasting approximately 15 minutes. As this was an introductory workshop, the activities were kept relatively short to help the children keep active, engaged and feel they were making progress through the workshop. This enabled the younger learners to participate in activities in small groups and work together to discuss 'what is dementia?', 'how persons with dementia might express themselves and feel', and 'how to cope if someone they know has dementia'. Each workshop was led by a student facilitator and supported by a lecturer, or the Alzheimer Scotland Dementia Friends trainer. The workshop was two and a half hours in duration including a break. As talking about dementia can precipitate strong emotions amongst participants, the peer facilitators also prepared an alternative fun activity for any learner who felt they could not take part or was overwhelmed during any of the sessions in the workshop.

At the start of the session, learners (n=18) were asked to provide a word or phrase or draw a picture to demonstrate their learning from the session. This enabled rapid collection of feedback that was accessible for all learners. Such creative approaches to evaluation are considered appropriate with younger participants as they help to maintain engagement and concentration (Green and Hogan 2005). The student facilitators maintained a reflective log following each session. The reflections included some evaluation data gained from the participants and field notes from the sessions (Box 2).

Table 2: Structure of reflective notes

Analysis of feelings
What went well / not so well
Consequences of actions
Connections between theory and practice knowledge/ way of knowing
New learning

## Findings

The children were asked at the beginning of the session to express *what do you think when you hear the word 'dementia'?* They could do this by either writing words or phrases on a piece of flipchart or drawing a picture. From analysing the responses to this question, the children seemed to have some negative assumptions associated with living with dementia. Five major themes were prominent: (1) dementia linked with old age; (2) persons living with dementia lose interest in life; (3) dementia is associated with negative emotions; (4) dementia is associated with memory loss; and (5) dementia is linked to death, disease and pain (see table 3). In addition to the phrases given, some children used imagery to portray their understanding of dementia (see figure 1). It is clear from both the phrases and the images that the children held some negative values and beliefs when thinking about a person living with dementia.

**Table 3: Words and phrases the children associated with the word 'dementia' before the session**

Theme	Word or phrase given by the children
<b>Dementia linked with old age</b>	Old People Elderly Grandad Gran Homes/Care homes Not always old people



<b>Persons living with dementia lose interest in life</b>	Staring at the wall Always in their own world Talking to themselves 'blah blah' Always thinking 'What?' Blank
<b>Dementia associated with negative emotions</b>	Upsetting for family Loneliness Depression Sad/Sadness Gets angry over small things Crazy
<b>Dementia associated with memory loss</b>	When you go out, you will not remember where you are Short term memory loss Forgetting things Forget who you are Memory Sometimes losing your mind
<b>Disease, pain and death</b>	Damaged Brain Back pain No treatment You will die because of dementia Brain 'Brain Dsez' (i.e. 'disease') Brain Cancer

Figure 1: Image portraying a child learner's understanding of dementia



At the end of the final session the children were invited to respond to the question '*how will you lend a hand to a person living with dementia?*' using words or pictures. Figure 2 shows an image provided by one of the children who participated in the session.

**Figure 2:** Image portraying how one child learner will lend a hand to a person living with a dementia



Analysis of the children's responses at the end of the session produced three themes: (1) Having positive social interactions with persons living with dementia (being with the person); (2) Offering assistance (doing things to help the person); and (3) having social grace (communicating with the person), although there were a few anomalies present (See Table 4).

**Table 4: How the children will lend a hand to persons living with dementia (after the workshop)**

Theme	Word/phrase given by the children
<b>Have positive social interactions with persons living dementia (being with the person)</b>	Spend time with them Chat to them to make them feel less lonely Take them for a walk Take them somewhere nice Sing Don't stop loving them
<b>Offering assistance (doing things to help the person)</b>	Help them Help them get home Help them cross the road Count their money and help Help them get off the bus and tell them when their stop is If they are confused try and help them make their decision

<b>Having social grace (communicating with the person)</b>	Speak to them Speak slowly and quietly Be polite Don't get annoyed with people who have dementia Don't smirk Listen to their conversations Do not say hurry up when in a queue Ask: "Are you ok?" Ask what the person wants Do not shout Speak nicely Smile Stick close Be kind Don't be impatient If someone was being aggressive to them I would tell them to stop
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After delivering the dementia awareness sessions, the student facilitators wrote reflective vignettes to critically review and understand their own learning and development. One student facilitator wrote,

*"Having really enjoyed taking part in the Dementia Friends sessions... I was excited to be given the opportunity to receive further education that would allow us to run our own dementia friends sessions...I feel far more confident in sharing my knowledge around dementia with other people. I also feel more confident in my ability to help patients and their relatives who are living with dementia. I hope I will be able to continue to help raise awareness of dementia and to use the knowledge I have to improve the care received by people living with dementia."*

Another student facilitator commented,

*"I really enjoyed becoming a Dementia Friends Facilitator which enabled me to contribute to the Children's University dementia awareness session. Caring for persons living with dementia has always been a deep passion of mine... therefore; becoming a Dementia Friends facilitator has given me the skills and confidence to raise awareness about dementia to colleagues, children and other members of the public."*

By co-facilitating dementia awareness sessions the student facilitators recognise that they have the skills and knowledge to educate healthcare professionals and members of the public about how they can help persons living with dementia within their communities. Arguably, these excerpts demonstrate some enhanced motivation and capability in leadership within dementia care.

## **Discussion**

The tone and content of the children's responses at end of the session contrasted with the responses at the beginning of the session. At the end of the session, the children's choice of words conveyed more positive understanding about dementia and how a person can live well with dementia. There was some recognition that persons living with dementia have a need and desire for having positive social interactions, and understanding that they may also need assistance with daily activities. It appears that interactive dementia awareness sessions, facilitated by students and staff, positively challenged the children's original perceptions about persons living with dementia. Although a small scale project, our findings are similar to those in a more in-depth study by Harris and Caporella (2018).

The development and co-production of appropriate, active and engaging learning sessions using peer-learning approaches allowed the students to take on a leadership role and pass on their knowledge and experience to peers and children, which links with existing literature on the value of peer facilitation (**Tharulli, O'Flaherty & Shepherd 2014**). Three nursing graduates are now Dementia Friends facilitators, with practiced facilitation skills, which can be transferrable to any professional or personal context. As a result of their endeavours, over fifty students and schoolchildren completed the Dementia Friends workshop and have considered ways in which they can help to support people to live well with a dementia in their communities. Such approaches are aligned with the national priorities to enable people with dementia to live safely in their communities and to feel valued and understood (Scottish Government 2017; Alzheimer's Society 2012). This project was an innovation for the team at QMU and

highlights the value of co-facilitation between staff and students. Student facilitators commented in their reflections that there had been an enjoyable and effective collaboration between staff and students to co-design and co-produce dementia awareness learning sessions and resources to support delivery of sessions.

This project showed that the prescribed Dementia Friends awareness training can be adapted into a more interactive workshop for children. The Dementia Friends sessions and children's workshop will be repeated in 2018. The project also offers a glimpse into one way in which a university can contribute to reducing stigma and to building dementia friendly communities. Making sure nurses are entering practice and children grow up valuing inclusivity and social justice are essential foundations to be addressed (Sabat 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Our experience suggests that peer learning is a valuable teaching and learning strategy, which can help increase public and professional awareness about dementia and has potential to inform and alter values and contribute to developing social justice for people living with dementia. Moreover, as nurses will be increasingly called upon to lead the care and support of people to live well with a dementia, the enhancement of graduate attributes amongst peer facilitators such as leadership and collaborative working will be valuable in their future professional practice.

## **Recommendations**

- HEIs actively endorse opportunities for students and staff to attend Dementia Friends awareness sessions as this will challenge misunderstandings and promote positive understanding about dementia and how persons can live well with dementia.
- More investment by educators to develop student peer facilitators to help increase public and professional awareness about dementia as this approach has great potential to promote learning, alter values and enhance the development of graduate attributes.

- HEIs consider how they can contribute to wider community and social action as part of national dementia strategies and the social justice agenda.

## **Conflicts of interest**

Nil

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